

April, 1980.

1.

the Hague.

Letter to Malaysia.

Dear Hooi,

After I returned from India where I paid homage to the Buddhist Holy Places, I found your letter, which I will answer now.

Q. 1: What is the Buddha's definition of kusala and akusala, how can we be sure whether a certain deed is really good or bad? Morality cannot be really defined, it's so subjective and relative.

Answer. In the 'Exhortation to Rahula at Ambalaṭṭhika' the Buddha explains to Rahula that a deed which conduces to the harm of self, to the harm of others and to the harm of both is unskilled, and it brings sorrow. When it does not bring harm to yourself, to others or to both ~~it~~ a deed is skillful or kusala.

This is a general definition. When you kill an insect you may have no doubt that it is akusala, ~~but~~ or when you steal, but there may be other kinds of deeds about which you may have doubts. That is why right understanding of one's different cittas must be developed, in order to know whether at this moment there is kusala citta with alobha, adosa, ~~and~~ which may be accompanied by paññā as well, or whether there is akusala citta, akusala citta rooted in ignorance and lobha, or rooted in ignorance ~~and~~ and dosa or rooted in ~~ignorance~~ just ignorance. We cannot ~~always~~ ~~know~~ precisely know the other's citta but right understanding of our cittas can be developed.

For instance, we may be giving a gift, are there kusala cittas all the time while we are giving? Also akusala cittas are bound to arise. We may be attached to the receiver, or to the gift itself, or we may regret the price we paid for the gift. Cittas change so rapidly. Right understanding of the different moments of cittas can be developed otherwise we take for kusala what is akusala and for akusala what is kusala. So we have to know the citta which appears now, at this moment, that is the only way.

You said morality is subjective and relative. Akusala citta is ~~always~~ akusala, kusala citta is ~~not~~ kusala, but you can only know yourself. Certain customs may change as to marriage, living together. We should know the citta at this moment. We cannot judge others. Lobha cannot be eradicated at once, first the wrong view of self should be eradicated. How? In being aware of all realities which appear, also the very ugly ones, they should be known as only conditioned realities, not self.

The Buddha exhorted people to be considerate for others, to have mettā. When we neglect the precepts there is no mettā, no consideration for others. When we are in doubt about morals, certain situations, we should consider: do I harm someone else, is there lack of mettā, do I cause ~~them~~ sorrow to others, do I harm the good name of someone else? There is bound to be a lot of lobha in the relationship with others, but lobha does not always have the intensity of akusala kamma patha, an unwholesome deed which has been completed and which is capable of causing an unhappy rebirth.

Q. 2: All impermanent things are unsatisfactory (dukkha). ~~What is dukkha?~~

A. We may have theoretical understanding of the fact that all that is subject to change and impermanent cannot give us security or happiness, that it cannot be a refuge for us. But this is not ~~really~~ the realisation of the noble truth of dukkha, it is only thinking. If we could understand at once what is dukkha after having read that birth is dukkha, etc. we would all be sotapannas now. This is not the way of paññā, the direct knowledge of the truth which has to be developed little by little. If paññā has not realised the arising and falling away of nāma and rūpa how could the truth of dukkha be realised. And then, before the arising and falling away of a nāma and rūpa can be realised, do we know what is nāma and what is rūpa? We know the names nāma and rūpa, but what about realising their different characteristics when they appear now?

The namas and rupas of our life are conditioned realities, we do not create them or make them arise. Now you are reading my letter, that is the situation now; you did not create this situation. Next moment you may be studying, another situation. Or helping in the house, being in the temple or looking at a movie, different situations. What we call situations are actually different namas and rupas which can be object of awareness one at a time. We think of people, house, letter, but these are conventional terms/. What is really there? Seeing, visible object, hearing, sound, thinking, hardness, softness, many different namas and rupas. They arise already because of conditions, we did not make them arise. They have all different characteristics, and right understanding of these characteristics can be developed at the moment they appear. At this moment. There is reading, but what is it? There are different namas and rupas and the right understanding of them can be developed when they appear one at a time. It may seem that there is only thinking of the meaning of the words, but must there not also be seeing, the experience of what appears through eyes, different from thinking about it? Seeing is a nama; it experiences something. The object seeing experiences is not an experience, a nama, it is rupa which does not experience anything. We can call it visible object or colour, it is just that what is experienced through eye-sense. Its characteristic can be known when it appears. Sati is aware of only one object at a time. The seeing conditions the thinking which arises at a moment, different from seeing. There are only six worlds: through eyes, ears, nose, tongue, bodysense and mind. In the beginning the understanding of the namas and rupas cannot be clear, but it can be developed very gradually only by being aware of one object at a time. This is a beginning of the development of pañña so that later on the truth of dukkha can be realised.

Without substance could be another word for anattā, but I am not sure whether this word is helpful to understand anattā. We can describe anatta with many words: only a reality, beyond control, one cannot be master of it. Again, only the right understanding which has been developed can know anatta. We can say: anatta, anatta, but what is it? Now we take all realities for self. What do we take for self? Seeing we take for self, is there not a notion of my seeing, I see? Hearing we take for self. Visible object we take for self, we think that it is somebody or something, while in fact it is only the reality which appears through eyes. We cannot touch what we see. When there is touching, hardness or softness may appear. We cannot see or touch a person, person is only a concept we may think of. Thinking is real, not the person.

Q. 3. What is Mara? is it like Satan?

A. We read in the 'Kindred Sayings' (III, Ch 23, Kindred Sayings about Rādhā, par. 23), that the Buddha said:

'That which is Māra, Rādhā, desire for that must be put away by you. And what, Rādhā, is Māra? Body, Rādhā, is Māra. Desire for that must be put away. Feeling, Rādhā, is Māra. So is perception (saññā), the activities (sankharakkhandha)... Consciousness is Māra. Desire for that must be put away.'

The following suttas explain Māra as everything that is impermanent, sorrowful, anattā, fleeting. Thus, the five khandhas are māra, everything which is dukkha is Māra, our kilesas are Māra. Nibbana is not Māra. Death is Māra. Thus, the meaning is wider than only an evil one who tries to tempt beings. Is there māra now?

The difference with satan: there is no god who can free you from Māra, your teacher cannot free you from Māra, only right understanding can. You have to develop it yourself, at this very moment, that is the way leading to freedom from all that is sorrowful. There is seeing now, thinking now, visible object now, they appear one at a time. Little by little right understanding can be developed, but we must not forget that this right understanding is not thinking about realities, but direct knowledge which can only be developed just now in your daily life. Looking forward to your next questions, Nina.